

## Do we really need a board?

*Boards are the lifeblood of a nonprofit organization and become the chief mission advocates within the community.*

This is a question that is not only asked when a person or group of people decide to form a nonprofit, but at various times throughout an organization's existence. The problem lies in the perception of value. If the board is viewed as only a group of figureheads or as an appendage to the organization with no real effectual purpose, the value of the board is never realized. Before a board can be effective, we need to be convinced that **boards really matter**. Maureen K. Robinson (2001) states this premise succinctly in her book, *Nonprofit Boards That Work*,

Most boards are never given opportunities to frame a vigorous defense for their existence or to build their performance in ways that establish that they do in fact matter. Boards have the potential to bring substantial value to the work of an organization but that value will remain largely untapped if it is not understood, articulated and cultivated (p. 13).

In actuality, lawmakers do place a great deal of value on boards as an entrusted entity of a nonprofit organization. Boards should be valued for what they are: a trustee of the public's interest. When the public entrusts an organization to provide the service they said they would provide, boards ensure and are responsible for that trust. This is a citizen's motivation to make a donation to a local cancer drive, to produce a community play, or to purchase that turkey to be given to a needy family for Thanksgiving. The board maintains the integrity of that donation and is held accountable for the organization's mission.

In addition to trust and accountability, board members serve as environmental analysts for your organization. They have “outside” eyes and ears and give the feedback that allows the organization to effectively use its resources to serve the public in a changing environment. Often the internal staff is too focused on the day-to-day functions of the organization to really take stock of the outside environment. An effective board will listen to the constituency and interact with outside influences to assess the current needs and how the organization’s current operating strategies fill those needs.

No one entity can have more influence than the board as an advocate for the values, vision and mission of an organization. Board members are often “movers and shakers” in the community and have a wide area of influence. However, even the least influential board member can be a passionate advocate of the mission of an organization. Because they are in a volunteer position, their desire to give their time and resources to that mission speaks volumes to your constituency.

Finally, one of the most powerful reasons to value a board is their potential for raising money. Often they offer a wealth of experience and a web of relationships to your fund raising efforts. Many have served on other boards and understand the fundamentals of fund raising while others bring knowledge of resources and the connections to sources of financial influence.

There is no more potentially powerful group of people than a board of trustees of a nonprofit organization that represent a common goal and share the same passion and vision. Each board member should consider this their strongest contribution to the success of the organization.

**In summary a board should be valued for:**

- Trust and accountability to the public
- Environmental scanning
- Advocates for the organization’s mission
- Resource gathering



## IDEAS & TOOLS TO USE THIS INFORMATION

### **As a Board Member:**

- Stay in tune with the outside environment and how effective your organization is in adapting to changes that occur.
- Value new board members for the strengths they bring to the group.
- Be a representative for your organization in all facets of your life. Know the mission and vision of the organization and share it often. Be ready to describe the organization's mission in the check-out line at the grocery store.
- Recognize potential sources of funding and serve as the link the organization may need to tap into those resources.
- Know your fiduciary responsibilities and perform that role with integrity.
- Be sure you understand the differences between for-profit and nonprofit accounting.
- Establish best practices and a code of ethics.

### **As a Board Chair:**

- Ensure that each new board member understands his/her fiduciary responsibilities when asked to serve on the board.
- Set aside time at board meetings to discuss the outside environment and lead an open dialogue of how the organization might respond to that environment.
- Help the board members identify any potential resource, both financial and knowledge-based, they have in the community. Often, they are unaware of their range of influence and an open discussion on a regular basis can lead to new resources.
- Express your enthusiasm for the mission of the organization often.

### **As an Executive Director:**

- Take advantage of every opportunity to express thanks to board members for their contributions.
- Value the sources of information about the environment that the board can be. Take time during planning sessions with the board to formally discuss these. Stay tuned to meeting discussions for new information and be open to ideas that are generated from these discussions.
- Establish a regular mode of assessing board links to resources and information.
- Orient new board members to board responsibilities and nonprofit law.
- Use implicit and explicit modes of communicating the value of the board to the success of the organization.